

Winter 1-1-1986

Colonel Hoppin's Newport

Richard L. Champlin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/newporthistory>



Part of the [Architectural History and Criticism Commons](#), [Historic Preservation and Conservation Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Champlin, Richard L. (1986) "Colonel Hoppin's Newport," *Newport History*. Vol. 59 : Iss. 201 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/newporthistory/vol59/iss201/3>

This Editorial is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Salve Regina. It has been accepted for inclusion in Newport History by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Salve Regina. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@salve.edu.

COLONEL HOPPIN'S NEWPORT

by

RICHARD L. CHAMPLIN

The tennis finalists at Newport's Casino stood poised for the first serve of the set. Chattering spectators grew silent. All eyes fastened for the most part on them, but also on the figure seated erectly by the net, the so-called net cord umpire, fitted out with a flashy Casino necktie, dark jacket, white trousers, white shoes and the inevitable boater hat. That figure had become a tradition at the Newport matches, whose job it was to keep his index finger on the net to feel what the eye might not see, the close grazing of a wayward tennis ball. His name — Col. Francis Laurens Vinton Hoppin, soldier, author, illustrator, architect and artist retired to Newport, who brought to his job a wide range of accomplishments. Incidentally, under that hat, but unseen to the public, he had tucked a fistful of maple leaves dipped in cool water to beat the heat.

After schooling in his native city of Providence, where he was born in 1866, Francis proceeded to military academy, but the pull toward a career in architecture gained the upper hand. Young Hoppin, at least temporarily setting aside a military life, studied instead at Brown University and at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, following that training with study in Paris, but apparently not at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, as has been asserted.¹ On returning to the United States, Hoppin joined the firm of McKim, Mead and White. Employment here should have been steady and continuous except for one thing — Frank Hoppin kept running off to Europe.² Reportedly, a letter from his mother to McKim, pleads for that architect to take him back once more. McKim did this, evidently appreciating Hoppin's exceptional skill at rendering. One architectural historian has written: "Among architects that had a facility for perspective Francis L.V. Hoppin stands out . . . He became the office specialist in perspective, as drawings for the Century Club and The Brooklyn Museum indicate. Egerton Swartwout, another office man, characterized Hoppin's drawings as 'colored, blue sky and trees where there aren't any, and flying shadows on the building, you know, a real snappy piece of work.' . . . and his talents as a renderer were always on call."³

Hoppin served with McKim, Mead and White from 1886 to

Richard L. Champlin is a Director of the Newport Historical Society, the Assistant Librarian of the Redwood Library, and a frequent contributor to *Newport History*.

1894 but, along with Terence Koen, soon established his own firm in New York City. When the Spanish-American War loomed on the horizon, Hoppin enlisted in the New York State National Guard, later being raised to the title of Colonel by Gov. Whitman. To the title "Colonel" he answered for the rest of his life, although it might be added parenthetically that his close associates in Newport later inverted his name, calling him "Hoppin Frank." For a period Robert P. Huntington joined the Hoppin and Koen staff. Also, Dudley Newton, Jr., a Newporter, and the son of a prominent Newport architect, began a two-year apprenticeship in Hoppin's office.⁴

Hoppin's commissions came largely from patrons in New York City and State, yet many of these patrons were, in the first decade of the twentieth century, no strangers to Newport. They include James Lanier, Andrew Zabriskie, J. Wysong, Harris Fahnestock, C. Oliver Iselin, Henry Clews, and W. Watts Sherman.

Hoppin's first Newport commission consisted of erecting a dwelling for Gen. Francis Vinton Greene, a relative. The records show that the work covered the years 1900 to 1904, when C.F. Hoffman took ownership of the estate. Under Hoffman and later his daughter, Mrs. Aymar Johnson, the splendid home became known as Armsea Hall, which stood next south of Hammersmith Farm on an eminence commanding a grand view of Narragansett Bay to the northwest. Archives at the Newport Historical Society show that the



Figure 14: Armsea Hall (demolished) stood off Ridge Road, next south of Hammersmith Farm. Photograph copyright by John Hopf.

building contract went to Robert W. Curry, a builder of Newport whom Hoppin came to rely on for other work. A glance at the pictures of Armsea Hall show the neat classical aspect of the mansion. During the presidency of John F. Kennedy, who visited the adjoining Hammersmith Farm, officials seriously considered converting Armsea Hall into a Summer White House, but budgetary considerations prevailed, and the mansion under a new name, Annandale Farm, was considered for a posh retirement home. At length, by 1970, Hoppin's first Newport project was demolished.

Hardly had he completed this work, than another Newport assignment opened up. James Lanier, owner of Gravel Court on Narragansett Avenue, a house which George Champlin Mason designed in 1860 for George Tiffany, sought Hoppin to redesign several rooms. This assignment coincided with the architect's designing of a complete house for Lanier in New York City, a house now placed on the National Register of Historic Buildings. The interior decorations executed by Hoppin & Koen at Gravel Court are depicted by watercolors done by Dubojinsky.

The finest monument to Col. Hoppin's work at Newport, Sherwood, although altered, still remains to be admired. The white mansion on the west side of Bellevue completely transformed an earlier cottage owned by Loring Andrews. As early as 1875 George Champlin Mason in his *Newport and its Cottages* acknowledged that feeling ran strongly against the Andrews residence. All the more remarkable, then, that Hoppin & Koen set about remodeling instead of razing the dwelling. Indoors and out the style Hoppin employed recalled English Georgian, with Adamesque features abounding. Gone was what a *Town & Country* article called "one of the most unsightly houses" in Newport, with its "excrescences which are peculiar to the original structure."⁵ What he ended up with has been likened to the White House in Washington, D.C.

Pembroke Jones, merchant and financier, had commissioned this work, which was accomplished between 1906 and 1908. Jones originally purchased the estate from the Havemeyers, who had called it Friedheim, but they took that name with them to their new home on Harrison Avenue. To the Joneses it became Sherwood, emphasizing its English character. Eight years later Hoppin's firm designed a ballroom for Sherwood, Jones' way of giving a vote of confidence to architect Hoppin. The daughter of Pembroke Jones, Sadie, went on to marry another trusted architect, John Russell Pope, who of course knew Hoppin and admired him, as Pope's daughter has said "for his architectural expertise."⁶



Figure 15: Sherwood, Bellevue Avenue at Bancroft Avenue, front elevation very much as Hoppin designed it. Photograph copyright by John Hopf.



Figure 16: Sherwood, west elevation. Photograph copyright by John Hopf.

Minor works by Francis Hoppin in Newport at this time included designing a marble tablet at Trinity Church in memory of Alfred G. Vanderbilt. Vanderbilt had perished with the *Lusitania* in 1915, having, according to eyewitnesses, deported himself nobly by

<https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/newporthistory/vol59/iss201/3>

surrendering his life jacket to a female fellow-passenger, who lacked one. Hoppin designed and laid out the 1914 Garden Show at the Casino and, more importantly, designed alterations to Land's End in 1917 for Gov. R.L. Beeckman, Land's End being the former dwelling place on Ledge Road of Edward and Edith Wharton.

Hoppin had several unexpected connections with the famous Edith Wharton. On her departure from Newport, she eyed the town of Lenox, Massachusetts for her residence. She, who had collaborated with the architect Ogden Codman on redesigning Land's End and on publishing jointly the treatise on interior design, turned at first to Codman for a house plan but then switched to Col. Frank to complete it. He, interestingly, again engaged the services of Robert Curry of Newport for constructing the country house. Mrs. Wharton named her new Lenox home The Mount, and in her *A Backward Glance* she praised the dwelling: "It is spacious and dignified . . . Its blessed influence still lives in me."

Might not those words, "spacious and dignified" apply to Hoppin's architecture in general? The description is apt even for that not inspired as The Mount was by an English dwelling, not only to Sherwood, for instance, and Armsea Hall in Newport, but to many other country homes he designed in Lenox, Long Island, Aiken and Palm Beach. Truly, the novelist coined the right phrase.

It will be remembered that when Edith Jones first married Edward Wharton, the couple resided across from the Joneses' Pen Craig on Harrison Avenue in what became known as Pen Craig Cottage or Pen Craig South, this before moving to Land's End. That very house, Pen Craig Cottage, Col. Francis Hoppin and his bride of nineteen years, Mary Gurnee Hoppin, bought and there summered from 1929 on. The Hoppins assigned a new name to the cottage, Auton House, taken from the Hoppin family homestead in Providence. On the back side of the property the architect had built a small studio of his own design for his own private use. The half-timbered studio still stands, though vandalized. He did occasional designing for Newport even after Koen's death and dissolving of the firm, for example a plan for the Clambake Club, shown in a *Sketchbook*, now at Redwood Library, and the plan for the central pavilion of Bailey's Beach, a structure swept off its foundation by the hurricane of 1938.

If his architectural career was drawing to a close, not so his career in art. The colonel produced dozens of watercolors usually of architectural subjects or of gardens. As Maud Howe Elliott observed:

"In his later years, Frank devoted himself to painting in water colors and sepia. Many people remember the exhibition he held a few years ago at Pierre's, in New York, when those who knew him as a brilliant, delightful man of the world, were amazed to learn that he was one of the serious creative artists of his time. He belonged to that group that made his era the Golden Age of American art . . ."7

A niece of Col. Hoppin, Mrs. Isabel Thorndike, explains how he made the transition from architecture to art. "During World War I," she explains, 'he was semi-retired, visiting at one of the family places in Bar Harbor, and with little to do at a resort in War Time, he was bored stiff. I was in my teens and already had been painting landscape in watercolor for several years. One day I invited my uncle to come painting with me as I was going to paint one of the gardens of the Blair place where my grandparents were that summer. Later he said, 'You know I just went along with her to keep her quiet, she nagged me so, and to have something to do.' The gardens were a natural for an architect, with formal flowerbeds surrounding a bronze fountain, around which a dragon writhed. In the background was a formal, columned summer house. He fell in love with painting that day, and thirteen days later had completed a meticulous exact portrait of the garden, down to the last rose petal.

"From then on," she continues, "there was no stopping him, and he painted in eastern U.S.A. and in Europe the rest of his life. He had several exhibitions in New York, at the Pierre, where he got commissions from everybody to paint their gardens, and usually sold out the first day of the show. Just for fun he built his studio in the garden at Auton House on Harrison Avenue with the proceeds of one of his New York shows."8

From a garden in Bar Harbor Hoppin traveled far and wide to paint. A memorial exhibition held at Newport's Art Association in 1942 brought together forty-two of his watercolors, more than half of these being European scenes, Rome, Venice, Florence, Paris, Warwick, Glatonsbury — all grist for his mill. Locally Hoppin painted Redwood Library, the gates at Bonniecrest, Malbone, The Waves, Newport Harbor, The Clambake Club, and many others.

The Col. Hoppin of tennis court fame, of the National Guard, of McKim, Mead and White, the renderer, the designer of elegant homes as well as utilitarian police headquarters, the watercolorist called a man of the world, departed this life on September 9, 1941 here in Newport. His widow later remarried. As Mrs. Alfred Townley and later still as Mrs. Cyril Judge, she bequeathed Auton House



Figure 17: Frank Hoppin at work on a watercolor of Malbone. Photograph courtesy of Mrs. Elizabeth Morris Smith.

to the Preservation Society along with a fine collection of the colonel's watercolors, now housed at Chateau-sur-Mer. Hoppin & Koen's account books estimates, plans, papers, and general memorabilia have been added to the collection of Redwood Library, courtesy of Mr. Guy Griscom.

One final anecdote about "Hoppin Frank" from the son of his benefactor, Gov. Whitman, will help fix the image of this well-dressed Edwardian. "By reason of his National Guard connections," writes Judge Charles Whitman, "Frank became my father's Military Secretary when my father was Governor, and, attired in a gorgeous uniform (which included a plumed hat appropriate for a Field Marshal), Frank would accompany my father on occasions of ceremony throughout the State.

"New York's capital, Albany, was a particularly inappropriate and inconvenient place to carry out military responsibilities in the middle of a World War, and the Legislature authorized my father to lease considerable space in the St. Regis Hotel at 55th Street. At that time, the St. Regis was largely staffed with German chambermaids.



Figure 18: Hoppin's watercolor of Malbone. See Figure 17, photograph taken while he painted this. From a private collection. Photograph by John Hopf.

"One morning, Colonel Hoppin, gorgeously apparelled, appeared in the St. Regis corridor, outside the rented rooms, to confer with the Governor.

"A German chambermaid took one look at Frank, screamed 'Mein Gott, der Kaiser,' and allegedly fainted."

FOOTNOTES

1. Richard Chafee, joint author of *The Architecture of the Ecole des Beaux-arts* (N.Y.: Museum of Modern Art, c1977) failed to find Hoppin's name on the student list at Ecole des Beaux-arts, but believes he might instead have studied at a Paris architect's *atelier*.
2. Verbal comment by Stuart Siegel to the author, Siegel being a student of Hoppin's work.
3. The Brooklyn Museum. *The American Renaissance, 1876-1917*. N.Y.: Pantheon Books, c1979, p. 99.
4. "Newport Journal, Oct. 29, 1900, p. 5, col. 1.
5. "Town & Country", no. 3253, Sept. 19, 1908, p. 12-15.
6. Letter to the author from Mrs. Jane Pope Ridgway, dated April 1, 1985.
7. *Quoted in A Loan Exhibition of Water Colors by the Late Col. F.L.V. Hoppin . . . 1942*, a Catalogue published by the Art Association of Newport; originally quoted from the Providence Journal, Sept. 25, 1941.
8. Letter to the author from Mrs. Isabel Gurnee Thorndike, dated July 23, 1980.